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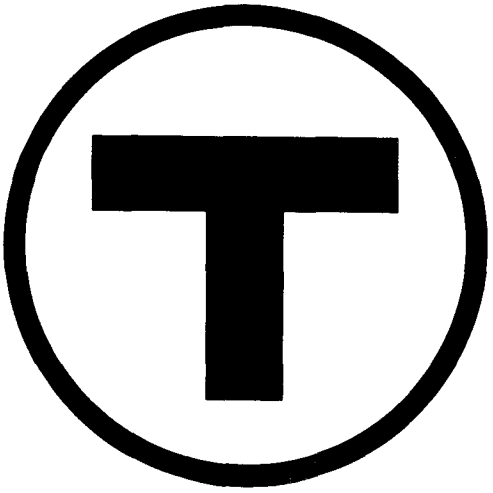

the slum beneath Boston

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BLACK CAPITALISM -- A PREFACE (PART TWO)

Strictly speaking, "black capitalism" is a contradiction in terms. Capitalism is the social system that recognizes ability as man's most important attribute, that casts away the matter of his skin color, homeland or race. A free society as such has no more concern with the hue of a man's face than with his blood type or shirt size.

In half-free America, however, race is becoming a pervasive consideration. Dozens of major universities now offer courses in "black history," which study or omit historical movements not on the basis of their objective importance but on the basis of their racial content. A Presidential candidate runs a campaign laced with hysterical white racism--and is rewarded with nearly ten million votes. Militant student terrorists shift into low gear, from blitzkrieg to attrition warfare, tearing at administrators with demands for "blacks only" dorms and study centers. A minor Presidential candidate (Eldridge Cleaver) runs a black racist campaign, captures few votes, but gains the loving attention of the college press for his obscenities on the subject of white women. The New York City school system is paralyzed by a power struggle in which Jews and Negroes trade seething racial slurs.

If "black capitalism" is to survive--as capitalism--if it is to be something more than a phony label for black power--it must overcome the current surges of race-consciousness. The notion that certain races or national groups have inherent traits of character--the conviction that one's color or one's country of origin endows one with automatic pride or shame--the idea that there are collective virtues or vices pooled among the members of a given racial group--these are fatal to capitalism. One cannot uphold a system which rests on the freedom of the individual while claiming that man is just a token of his race. Racism--the practice of attributing to

individuals the alleged traits of their race-collective--must be understood and rejected by all those who would advocate truly capitalist "black capitalism."

A major roadblock on the way to such understanding is the American press. Fond of such ominous phrases as "A Divided Nation" and "A Crisis in Black and White"--but fearful of identifying the precise nature of racial tensions--the press merely adds its own confusions to those of the public at large. A marionette philosophy of news ("tell them what they want to hear") conceived in an intellectualvacuum, has led the press to parrot the principles of racism in its very own "objective" news reporting. Countless reporters make useless reference to the race of participants in news events and speak glibly of "the black community" or "the white man" --as if such collectives lived and breathed in reality. Racially innocent events are reported otherwise--racist premises slip unnoticed into ordinary news accounts.

One major news magazine recently asserted, when discussing the rise of militant black racism on campus, that it was no more than "backlash" against the prejudice of whites--that "racism breeds racism." Thus did it employ a major premise of racism itself--that the individual when confronted with a new situation responds automatically, according to his race, responding as a weed responds to sunlight. The magazine presented the situation as if there had been no alternatives and no questions of ethical choice. But contrary to what racists might hold, men do not respond automatically to the physical conditions of their lives--they are not at all like cabbages and apple trees--they think and choose. How they will respond to racism depends not upon their race but upon how they, as individuals, regard themselves and their lives.

Another occasion of implicit press racism was the final program, on September 2, 1968, of the CBS "Of Black America" series. Presented in the program were results of an Opinion Research Corporation survey on American racial attitudes, and though an astonishing number of the questions were seriously flawed, one will serve for illustration. In an attempt to gauge white racism, the interviewee was given this problem: "As a race, Negroes are not as civilized as whites. Would you agree or disagree?"

Because one cannot ask about Negroes "as a race," the question could not, as the program had claimed, hope to offer any measure of the interviewee's prejudice. The question is, at worst, implicitly racist and, at best, cruelly ambiguous. Was one being asked whether "civilized" whites outnumber "civilized" Negroes--or whether Negroes are determined, genetically, to be less "civilized" than whites? (How a multi-million dollar broadcasting corporation could make such basic mistakes is a question we hope to answer in a future article on objectivity in news reporting.)

The poisoned springs of racism which presently dot America are part and parcel of growing welfare-statist trends. The train of coercive programs which such "humanistic engineers" as Hubert Humphrey have brought into being, discounts the freedom and importance of individual. According to the prophets of statutory utopia, men are

to be subject to the dictates of the "greater good"--of "society"--of other men. The welfare regime regards society not in terms of individuals, but in terms of powered aggregates--the old, the sick, the poor, producers, consumers, farmers, labor and so on. If the state may favor men because they are old and poor, and handicap others because they are healthy and young, then what ethical principle prevents it from playing with still another category--race? If the Weimar Republic was established partially on collectivism--if it had already established, in constitutional theory as well as practice, that there were group rights which transcended the individual--then what could possibly have prevented rise of privilege-by-race? In any society the step from political to racial tribalism is not even a step; it is a mere twitch.

If racism is to receive no official encouragement in America, statism must first be overturned. Only then will the matter of one's race diminish in importance. Moreover, if "black capitalism" is to be distinct from racist "black power," it must seek freedom from the aid and interference of the state. It must seek a color-blind government that guarantees the liberty and independence of all men.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

MBTA: THE SLUM BENEATH BOSTON
by Lanny Friedlander

"Capitalism causes slums." Thus might run the first line of a statement by prominent social critics of today. "Free trade," they might assert, " results in dehumanizing poverty." This is so well known that in stating it, we border on truism. The era of capitalism is over; the golden age of government involvement has begun. Time and time again, American entrepreneurs have displayed their inability to deal with social problems that threaten to crush us. Unemployment, poor housing and inadequate education have touched off a cycle of despair which is spinning toward chaos.

"This cycle must be broken, before our society spirals into violent collapse. Government must do the job; the alternative has failed.

"Although a few of the business community's more enlightened members have begun to wrestle with slum problems, they generally must do so at a low rate of profit. For one reason or another, firm after firm has found rebuilding the central cities an unrewarding task. As long as the entrepreneur must keep one eye fixed on profits, his experiments in human reclamation can have only token effects.

"The government, however, has no excuse. The petty inter-agency and multi-level infighting must be stopped. Injurious restrictions on direct government spending must be relaxed, and programs made more effective through use of a broader political and geographic base. Inefficient methods must give way to more systematic ones. Congress should, for example, consider the possibility of the negative income tax as substitute for the knotted network of local and national welfare.

"The problems of the cities," these critics might conclude," can be solved only when the government is granted power freely to replace the fumblings of free enterprise with a multi-pronged attack of modern programs."

So it is that prominent social critics would agree: Capitalism causes (or is at least unable to eradicate) slums; governments could cure them, given the chance. Time agrees; Newsweek concurs. "Yes, that's the way it is," chime Life and Look in unison. The sedate New York Times nods assent. "Maybe you've got something there," offers U.S. News apologetically.

According to the dominant critics, blame for the slums is to be placed more or less upon the property owners. After all, who else could be at fault? Government action has been directed either toward regulation of the owners, as in rent controls, or toward their elimination through the power of "eminent domain," as in public housing and urban renewal. The more power and the more tax money which the government can brandish in these situations, it is thought, the more successful will be its attempts to renovate the cities.

Thus the politicians of Boston have applauded the Federal government's decision to make theirs a Model City, under the Model Cities Act, a blueprint for what is little more than giant-size urban renewal.

Before such a program is undertaken, however, it would be appropriate to question the premises upon which it is based. Most of the relevant questions may be subsumed under one: How does the introduction of political power, i.e., of force, help to solve extremely complex urban problems? Implicit in this is the question as to whether the government can actually eradicate slums.

The city of Boston has already provided an answer.

The city of Boston owns and controls one of Boston's most extensive slum properties, and has in fact controlled it for nearly a century.

The properties in question, The Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority's (MBTA or "T") subway holdings, are such that they afford the city total control over every aspect of environment and operation. Having listened to the "liberal" social critics, we might then expect a paradise. The Authority has the power. It has the money--$70,000,000 a year. But "paradise" would hardly be an apt description of its floundering system of subways.

Indeed, the system displays many of the dominant characteristics of a slum: overcrowding, filth, inadequate sanitary facilities, poor heating, high accident rate due to faulty equipment, high and rapidly rising prices, and decrepit visual surroundings.

At Park Street Station, for example, literally thousands of customers (33,000 per day) must crowd onto a narrow platform to wait for cars that arrive at erratic intervals. Station police allow the trains to be packed past the limits of comfort and safety; the

Authority cannot or will not provide more rolling stock. Operators often slam doors on riders attempting to get on or off. It is standard operating procedure for drivers of outbound Cleveland Circle trains to discharge passengers at the Park Street boarding location, instead of making two separate stops and thus preventing the riot scene of customers attempting to board and to leave at the same time and place.

Government Center, another major station, although recently redesigned and rebuilt under a special Federal grant, is similarly clogged. It is triangular, with trains arriving on two sides and discharging passengers onto a common platform. As in the case of the Cleveland Circle trains at Park Street, passengers must exit through the car's single left-hand door (the right side has two doors) and brave the friendly mob waiting to board.

Filth and garbage litter the stations. Plastic bags and open cardboard boxes filled with used paper cups and half-eaten pizzas from a concession stand are thoughtlessly stacked against a wall at Park Street for hours at a time. Although stations seem to be swept daily, it is to no avail; the concrete remains dark and gritty, as if dirt were part of its surface. Perhaps it now is--most of the stations have not been thoroughly cleaned now in years.

In all the system, there is only one set of rest rooms. Derelicts and assorted stray alcoholics, however, have found adequate substitutes--the passageways leading to the stations.

Frigid winter gusts whip into subway entrances, turning customers at such stations as Haymarket into tortured windtunnel prisoners, sentenced to shiver while waiting for chronically overdue trains.

Derailments, breakdowns and even collisions are commonplace in Boston's subsurface funhouse. A Harvard-Ashmont train, for example, jumped track last summer, causing a two-day delay while crews worked to replace ruined rail. Ancient street cars on the "Green Line" frequently expire while in service, leaving passengers stranded. When cars aren't breaking down, they can be found crashing into each other, particularly at busy stations such as Park Street, the site of several such mishaps last year.

With a few notable exceptions, none of the stations have been updated since their construction at the turn of the century. The walls of most are chipped, cracked, peeling, covered with graffitti, badly in need of soap, water and paint. The floors are filthy (swept but rarely if ever washed), often heavily littered and beginning to crumble in places. Such graphic aids as signs, maps and instructions are unclear, inaccurate, vandalized or non-existent Wastebaskets and benches are infrequent.

In the last 18 years, the price of admission into the subway has risen approximately 66%, or about 4% a year. However, this is merely apparent cost. After figuring in local and Federal taxes used to pay the system's debt, the cost of a subway ride across the city becomes as expensive as sharing a taxi.

When questioned about its slumholdings, the Authority is quick to blame its failures on lack of money. But is it that simple?

Is it lack of money that prevents operators from making two separate stops at Park Street? Lack of money that causes them to collide? Lack of money that prevents the concession stand from removing garbage? Lack of money that prevents the officer at the information booth at Park Street from replacing the ten-year old wall maps with the expensive ones the Authority just printed? No, it is not lack of money that is to blame, but lack of competence, of care--of incentive.

No matter how well funded the Authority was, it could not run the system efficiently. Let the case of graphic aids in the newly renovated stations serve as illustration. The Authority can hardly excuse itself for oversights here by whimpering that it didn't have the money. These stations were rebuilt using Federal and state grants of over $9 million. Yet oversights there are.

At Airport, for example, signs pointing out the exit for the airport bus are abutted at each end by vertical structural columns which block one's view of the arrows, unless one happens to stand in the proper position. Since seeing the arrows is of more importance than seeing the last letter of one's destination, it would be logical to redesign the sign. Cost (while in the planning stage): $0.

After a visit to Government Center, one becomes convinced that the Authority's designers were either blind or deranged. Again an important (and rather expensive) lighted sign is impossible to see until one is directly beneath it. The sign is blocked by low-hanging flourescent lights. Upstairs--if one can find his way upstairs-the Authority's multi-million dollar ineptness is again aptly demonstrated by its choice of wall murals to symbolize Government Center: a crude stylization of the American Flag, made vaguely to resemble a bright red swastika.

The artlessness displayed in the choice of graphic designers can be related to a broad general principle. Government-supported institutions tend to draw on the least competent help and, all other things being equal, public employees tend to do a poorer job than they would for a private concern.

In a free society, the owner of a private subway system would be forced by economic considerations to provide excellent service and handsome surroundings. Competition from other forms of transportation would see to that. If the subway did not provide service attractive enough to draw customers from other modes of transportation, it could not make enough profit to stay in business. But no such pressure operates in the case of the MBTA, which has a bottomless well of tax revenue to draw upon (about $30 million a year.)

In a free society, the subway owner would be encouraged to hire, promote and fire employees exclusively on their ability and performance, in order to maximize service and profit. Employees would have tremendous incentive to do their best. The personnel procedures of the MBTA, however, are characterized by featherbedding, seniority systems and complex dismissal procedures.

The private subwayowner--and his employees--would be encouraged to rid themselves of these useless roadblocks. Customers would likely

not be attacked by sadistic rush-hour door-closers, or ignored at bus stops by behind-schedule drivers, or forced to exit at unnecessarily crowded locations. The private owner would be encouraged to reward building contracts according to objective standards, rather than to the lowest bidder.

Contrary to the engrained thought patterns of the fourth estate, political power is not the solution to the slums. Power perpetuates them.

If the MBTA has failed to alleviate its slum conditions, it is not despite, but because of, its tremendous powers. The power physically to exclude competitors from the field--the power to cover enormous deficits with tax money--these turn what could be a forward looking, profit-making transit operation into a bloated socialist pig, concerned only with maintaining the status quo and qualifying for even larger chunks of Federal loot. Unless the system is turned over to private hands and given total freedom, the pig will continue to vegetate beneath Boston.

Far from blocking the road to slum recovery, it is capitalism and freedom which could serve as the springboard of growth and new health. If the citizens and the press is confused as to the roles of power and freedom in man's progress, they would do well to take a short ride on the "T." There they will find the squalid results of the doctrine of power.

EDITOR'S NOTES:

On 19 January 69 the editor of REASON spoke on the subject of student terrorism to a group of Portland (Me.) residents at the home of William Altenburg. He described various efforts directed towards bringing lasting peace to troubled campuses -- generally educational activities such as speeches, radio programs, and discussion groups. -- which REASON has learned of through its survey of student groups in intellectual opposition to the New Left.

INTELLECTUALS'MARKETPLACE:

Beginning with this issue, REASON will publicize those sources of original research and scholarly investigation which readers may wish to make available for sale or for exchange. If readers have a file or original essays which they think might be of interest to other students in their field, or if they desire certain information which they have not been able to obtain, REASON will publish their offers, free of charge.

Student terrorism and other college-related subjects: clippings available. Write Jackie Estrada for details, 4471 44th St. Apt. 102 San Diego, Calif., 92115.

Wanted: research material or articles: air pollution and individual rights. Write John Cody, 2305 N. Kedvale, Chicago, Ill. 60639.

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E.D.A. is creating the technical, managerial, and philosophical skills required to concretize this goal. E.D.A. offers an opportunity for men (and women) of the mind to develop their field conceptually and to apply those concepts directly in the creation of environment.

IN MONTHS TO COME:

"We are questioning the legitimacy of the university as a social institution. We are challenging its right to exist organized as it is presently...." These are recent words of a new leftist at Boston University. What, then, does the Left offer as an alternative? What precisely are its complaints with the universities of today? Next month a University of California graduate student answers these questions and analyzes the New Left's answer to modern education in "The 'Critical University'".